

Suárez's Influence on Descartes's Theory of Eternal Truths

AMY KAROFSKY

Hofstra University

INTRODUCTION

There is a philosophical problem, what I will call the problem of eternal truths, that can be stated as follows: If an unactualized, possible essence has no being and is, hence, absolutely nothing, then what grounds the eternal and necessary truth of propositions that purport to be about them? If there were no men, what would ground the necessary truth, "Man is a rational animal"? And what grounded the truth of that proposition prior to the creation of the world? (If it *was* in fact true at that moment?)

Suárez and Descartes offer different solutions to this problem. Although it is generally accepted that Suárez is Descartes's adversary with respect to the doctrine of eternal truths, few interpretations of Descartes's theory focus enough attention on Descartes's reaction to Suárez's solution. Of the commentators who do interpret Descartes's theory as a response to Suárez, most work with an inadequate interpretation of Suárez.¹

In the first part of this article, I offer an interpretation of Suárez's solution to the problem of eternal truths. I show that Suárez solves the problem of eternal truths by maintaining that eternal and necessary truths are grounded in essences that flow from the divine essence. On this *divine realist* theory, essences are in themselves absolutely nothing, but they derive reality as expressions of the divine essence. In the second part, I examine Descartes's reaction to Suárez's theory, and I discuss Descartes's own solution to the problem. I maintain that Descartes rejects Suárez's theory primarily because he believes that Suárez cannot account for divine freedom. Against Suárez, Descartes maintains that God must have an active role in the determination of the essences. Descartes's solution to the problem is thus a *voluntarist* position, what has come to be known as the *creation theory* of

1. Alanen and Knuuttila offer a good interpretation: Lilli Alanen and Simo Knuuttila, "The Foundations of Modality and Conceivability in Descartes and His Predecessors," *Modern Modalities: Studies of the History of Modal Theories from Medieval Nominalism to Logical Positivism*, ed. Simo Knuuttila (Synthese Historical Library 33, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), pp. 1–69.

eternal truths. On Descartes's view, God is the efficient cause of everything—every creature, every essence, and thus every eternal truth. However, as I demonstrate, although Descartes offers the creation theory as a way to preserve divine freedom, it seems that he is unsuccessful and is ultimately committed to some form of divine realism.

PART I: SUÁREZ'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

Suárez espouses his doctrine of eternal truths in *Metaphysical Disputation Thirty-One*. In that text, Suárez considers and rejects several possible solutions to the problem of eternal truths before offering his own. It is difficult to determine which views Suárez rejects and which views he accepts, hence interpretation of this work has proven quite difficult. In what follows, I provide a brief interpretation of Suárez's theory of eternal truths as it appears in this work.²

1.1 Suárez's Theory of Eternal Truths

In *Metaphysical Disputation Thirty-One*, Suárez sets out to examine the nature of essences and essential propositions (that is, propositions in which an essential property is attributed to some thing). In the first part of the disputation, he shows that unactualized, possible essences are absolutely nothing.³ According to him, "being" means "actually existent"; thus, nothing has being until it has been created by God.⁴ Prior to the creative act of God, an unactualized, possible essence lacks being; and lacking being, it is nothing.

Suárez acknowledges that his view that an unactualized essence is absolutely nothing is subject to the following objection:

if, with the removal of existence, the essence perishes, then those propositions in which essential predicates are predicated of a thing, are not necessary, nor eternal truths.⁵

2. I offer a detailed interpretation of Suárez's theory of eternal truths in "Suárez' Theory of Eternal Truths," *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001).

3. "Principio statuendum est, essentiam creaturae, seu creaturam de se, et priusquam a Deo fiat, nullum habere in se verum esse reale, et in hoc sensu, praeciso esse existentiae, essentiam non esse rem aliquam, sed omnino esse nihil," *Metaphysical Disputation* (MD) 31, 2, 1. Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes metaphysicae* (repr. from *Opera omnia*, Vives, Paris, 1856–1878, vol. 26). (Translations in this paper are my own with the assistance of: *On the Essence of Finite Being as Such, On the Existence of that Essence and their Distinction*, trans. Norman J. Wells [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983].)

4. MD 31, 1, 2. For a discussion about the meaning of 'essence' and 'being' in Suárez, see Joseph Owens, "The Number of Terms in the Suarezian Discussion on Essence and Being," *The Modern Schoolman* 34 (1957): 147–91.

5. MD 31, 12, 38: "... si, ablata existentia, perit essentia, ergo propositiones illae in quibus praedicata essentialia de re praedicantur, non sunt necessariae, neque perpetuae veritatis."

This is a version of the problem of eternal truths. If the truth of essential propositions is based upon the essences, and if the essences are absolutely nothing, then the truth of the propositions is based upon nothing. Hence essential propositions can be neither necessarily, nor eternally, true. This consequence is unacceptable, however, for without necessary and eternal essential propositions, there can be no science of creatures. Thus, if one holds, as Suárez does, that unactualized, possible essences are absolutely nothing, then he must either provide an account of the necessity and eternity of essential propositions that explains how what is nothing can be the bearer of truth, or provide an account that grounds the truth of essential propositions in something other than unactualized, possible essences.

Suárez continues the disputation by considering several different solutions to the problem of eternal truths. One solution he considers and ultimately rejects is a *divine conceptualist* position. The divine conceptualist grounds the truth of essential propositions in the divine intellect, rather than in the essences, and thus asserts that the propositions are true because God knows them. Furthermore, the divine conceptualist maintains that because God knows essential propositions from all eternity, such propositions are eternally and necessarily true.⁶ In this way, one can assert the claim that unactualized essences are absolutely nothing, and yet account for the necessity and eternity of essential propositions. On the divine conceptualist's view, true essential propositions remain true even after the destruction of the creature because they enjoy eternal residence in the divine intellect.

Suárez argues that divine conceptualism does not allow for a distinction between true essential propositions and true accidental propositions (that is, propositions in which an accidental property is attributed to some object or other). For, Suárez explains, God knows not only true essential propositions from all eternity, but he knows true accidental propositions from all eternity, as well.⁷

The divine conceptualist might try to respond by maintaining that while both necessary and accidental propositions are in the divine intellect from all eternity, essential propositions, and not accidental propositions, are necessarily in the divine intellect. As Suárez points out, however, this response presents a Euthyphroian dilemma: Either (a) essential propositions are in the divine intellect because they are necessarily true; or (b) essential propositions are necessarily true because they are in the divine intellect. If (a), then the necessity of essential propositions would be prior to, and hence not dependent upon, the divine intellect. So it seems that the divine conceptualist

6. According to Norman Wells, Suárez is a divine conceptualist: Norman J. Wells, "Suárez on the Eternal Truths: Part I," *The Modern Schoolman* 58 (1981): 159–74. In the article mentioned in fn. 2, I argue that this is an incorrect interpretation of Suárez's theory.

7. MD 31, 12, 40: "Quia hoc modo non solum hujusmodi enuntiationes, in quibus attributa essentialia praedicantur, sed omnes etiam accidentales seu contingentes, quae verae sunt, habent veritatem perpetuam in intellectu divino."

must reject (a). However, it follows from (b) that the truth of essential propositions would be determined by God, and consequently, such propositions would not be necessary, but contingent—contingent upon God’s choice.⁸ Since the divine conceptualist seems committed to (b), from which it follows that there are no necessary and eternal, essential propositions, Suárez rejects divine conceptualism as a solution to the problem of eternal truths. He concludes that an adequate solution to the problem must maintain that the truth of essential propositions is prior to the divine intellect, not grounded in it.⁹

After rejecting divine conceptualism as a solution to the problem of eternal truths, Suárez considers another solution, a version of which he adopts. This position, what I will refer to as *primitivism*, maintains that the eternal truth of an essential proposition is grounded in the connection between the essential properties involved in the proposition. The connections between these properties are necessary and uncreated, thus the truth of the propositions based upon them is independent of any efficient cause, including God. So according to the primitivist, it is a given characteristic of the property ‘being a man’ that it necessarily involve the property ‘being an animal’. Consequently, the truth of the essential proposition, “Man is an animal,” is grounded, not in the essence of Man, but in the uncreated, necessary connection between the properties, ‘being a man’ and ‘being an animal’.

Suárez accepts the basic tenets of the primitivist solution. In particular, he adopts the claim that the truth of essential propositions is grounded in the connections between the properties represented by the terms in the proposition.¹⁰ However, Suárez cannot accept primitivism in its entirety. For as it stands, primitivism seems to suggest that properties are Platonic entities, existing independently of the divine being. And since Suárez holds that nothing has being prior to God’s creation, these properties would be in no better position to ground essential propositions than unactualized, possible essences. In order to avoid Platonism, the reality of the properties must ultimately depend upon God.

According to Suárez, the properties, and the essences that they combine to form, express the very being of God. God does not will them to be as they are, nor are they mere objects of the divine intellect; and yet they are not real in themselves. Rather, the essences, upon which the necessity and eternity of essential propositions are based, express the divine essence. In this way, Suárez can claim that unactualized, possible essences are, in themselves,

8. MD 31, 12, 40: “. . . nam si ab ipso Deo proveniret earum veritas, id fieret media voluntate Dei; unde non ex necessitate proveniret, sed voluntarie.”

9. MD 31, 12, 40: “. . . neque illae enuntiationes sunt verae quia cognoscuntur a Deo, sed potius ideo cognoscuntur, quia verae sunt, alioqui nulla reddi posset ratio, cur Deus necessario cognosceret illas esse veras.”

10. MD 31, 12, 46: “. . . hanc connexionem nihil aliud esse quam identitatem extremorum, quae sunt in propositionibus essentialibus et affirmativis.”

absolutely nothing; yet, as identical with the divine essence, they are real.¹¹ The truth of essential propositions is thus grounded in the connections between properties, which are themselves expressions of the divine essence. I call Suárez's solution to the problem of eternal truths, *divine realism*.

By adopting divine realism, Suárez can avoid the Platonist commitment to independently existing essences, on the one hand, and the voluntarist view that essences are causally dependent upon the divine being, on the other. Suárez maintains that since the essences flow from the divine essence, they are in this sense dependent upon God. But the essences are not created by God and thus are not dependent upon him as efficient cause.

1.2 Essential Propositions Do Not Require an Efficient Cause For Their Truth: An Explanation of *Metaphysical Disputations Thirty-One, Twelve, and Forty-Five*

In *Metaphysical Disputations Thirty-One, Twelve, and Forty-Five*, Suárez shows that essential propositions do not require the efficient causality of the divine being. This section has been quite difficult to interpret. Many commentators take Suárez to be suggesting that essential propositions would be true even if (*per impossibile*) there were no God.¹² However, it is important to see that this is not Suárez's point here at all. In fact, Suárez would deny that essential propositions could be true if there were no divine being. For, again, Suarezian essences, upon which the truth of essential propositions is grounded, are in some sense dependent upon the divine being. Essences express the divine essence. If there were no God, there could be no essences; if there were no essences, there could be no truths. Thus Suárez does not claim that there could be eternal truths in the absence of the divine being.

Instead, in *Metaphysical Disputations Thirty-One, Twelve, and Forty-Five*, Suárez argues that the truth of an essential proposition does not require an efficient cause. Suárez begins by explaining that a true essential proposition does not imply the existence of the terms. For example, the truth of the proposition, "Man is an animal," implies neither the existence of a man, nor the existence of some essence.¹³ Rather, the truth of that proposition

11. MD 31, 2, 4: "... ergo neque essentia manere potest sub aliquo vero esse reali distincto ab esse creatoris."

12. Curley suggests that Suárez holds that eternal truths are true independently of God—that they would be true even if God did not exist. See Edwin Curley, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 93 (1984): 586. Harry Frankfurt comes closer to the right interpretation in his "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977).

13. MD 31, 12, 45: "At vero in alio sensu propositiones sunt verae, etiamsi extrema non existant; et in eodem sunt necessariae ac perpetuae veritatis, quia cum copula est, in dicto sensu non significet existentiam, non attribuit extremis actualem realitatem in seipsis, et ideo ad suam veritatem non requirit existentiam, seu realitatem actualem."

indicates that being an animal is part of the nature of man. So true essential propositions assert the impossibility of the object coming to be without the property: “For when we say that man is animal, . . . we say nothing else than that this is the nature of man, that it is impossible for man to come to be without being an animal.”¹⁴ Consequently, essential propositions may be rendered as hypothetical statements: If a thing is an X, and the nature of X includes the property ϕ , then the thing is ϕ . If a thing is a man, and because the nature of Man includes the property ‘being an animal’, the thing is an animal. It follows that the essential proposition, “Man is an animal,” may be reduced to the conditional statement, “If it is a man, then it is an animal.” Finally, because the truth of hypothetical statements does not depend upon the actual existence of the object, the truth of essential propositions does not require an efficient cause that can, or does, create the object. And so Suárez concludes that “if, by way of the impossible,” there were no cause that could create an animal, the proposition, “Every animal is able to sense,” would still be true, “just as this is true: A *chimera* is a *chimera*.”¹⁵

Again, Suárez is not claiming that essential propositions would be true even if there were no God; he is asserting that the truth of an essential proposition does not require an efficient cause—not even that of God. The properties and connections that make up the essences are neither created nor determined by God; they express his essence and derive their reality therefrom. Thus Suárez maintains that essential propositions do not require an efficient cause for their truth.

What Suárez’s divine realism amounts to, then, is a position somewhere in between the primitivist/Platonist position, that true essential propositions are true independently of the divine being, and the divine conceptualist/voluntarist position, that true essential propositions are dependent upon the divine being. Suárez maintains that the truth of essential propositions is grounded in the connections between essential propositions that flow from the divine essence necessarily.

With this understanding of Suárez’s theory of eternal truths, I want to turn now to examine Descartes’ reaction to it. It will be seen that Descartes accepts Suárez’s claim that unactualized, possible essences are absolutely nothing, but rejects the divine realist solution to the problem of eternal truths, primarily because he believes that such a view threatens divine freedom.

14. MD 31, 12, 45: “Item, hoc declaratur ex praedictis auctoribus, quia propositiones in hoc sensu reducuntur ad sensum hypotheticum seu conditionatum; cum enim dicimus hominem esse animal, abstrahendo a tempore, nihil aliud dicimus, nisi hanc esse hominis naturam, ut non possit fieri homo quin sit animal. Unde, sicut haec conditionalis est perpetua, *Si est homo, est animal*, vel, *Si currit, movetur*, ita haec est perpetua, *Homo est animal*, vel, *Cursus est motus*. Atque hinc etiam fit ut hae connexiones in hoc sensu non habeant causam efficientem, quia omnis efficientia terminatur ad actualem existentiam, a qua dictae propositiones in hoc sensu abstrahunt.”

15. MD 31, 12, 45.

PART II: DESCARTES ON ETERNAL TRUTHS

Like Suárez and most other medieval philosophers, Descartes holds that nothing is independent of God, and that a thing has being only as a result of God's creative act.¹⁶ Descartes thus accepts Suárez's primary claim that unactualized essences are absolutely nothing. Furthermore, like his predecessors, Descartes maintains that essences ground the truth of necessary propositions. Consequently, Descartes is also faced with the problem of eternal truths: How can essential propositions be necessary and eternal if the essences upon which the propositions are based are absolutely nothing prior to creation? As explained above, Suárez solves the problem by maintaining that though the essences in themselves are absolutely nothing, they derive reality by expressing the divine essence. However, Descartes argues that such a divine realist solution threatens God's freedom. He adopts, instead, a voluntarist theory, according to which God creates essences and thereby determines the truth of essential propositions.

I will now discuss Descartes's primary objection to Suárez's divine realism. Taking this objection into consideration, I will examine Descartes's own solution to the problem of eternal truths.

2.1 Descartes's Reaction to Divine Realism

Descartes objects to Suárez's divine realism primarily because it does not allow for genuine divine freedom. According to Suárez, God is passive with respect to the determination of essences. Possible essences flow from the divine essence independently of the divine will. God's role becomes active when He chooses from among the possible essences those He desires to actualize. God is *free*, on Suárez's view, because He has this choice. Descartes, however, argues in a variety of ways that such a portrayal of God's creative action does not allow for genuine freedom.

In some places, Descartes argues that the Suarezian account cannot provide for genuine divine freedom with respect to the value of the possible essences. Descartes explains that an omnipotent and omnibenevolent being must necessarily choose the best of all possible essences. So, if the value of the essences is prior to God's choice, then his action would be determined.

If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things which it was best to do. But on the contrary, just because He resolved to prefer those things which are now to be done, for this very reason, in the words of Genesis, "they are very good", in other words, the reason for

16. CSM II, 294; AT 436; Sixth Set of Replies.

their goodness depends on the fact that He exercised his will to make them so.¹⁷

Against the Suarezian theory, Descartes thus maintains that the value of the essences cannot be given prior to God's choice to create, otherwise he will not be genuinely free with respect to his creative action.

In other places, Descartes asserts that divine freedom is threatened not only by a prior value, but by any nature that is inherent in the essences prior to the divine will to create. If the natures of essences are prior to God's choice, then some will be preferable to others. If some essences are preferable, then God's action with respect to what to create is not genuinely free. So, he explains, God did not will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because He recognized that it could not be otherwise; on the contrary, "it is because He willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise."¹⁸ According to Descartes, then, there can be nothing in the essences themselves that makes some preferable to others.

Descartes thus rejects the Suarezian account of divine freedom since it entails a choice from among essences with inherent natures and values. Descartes's account of divine freedom entails, not a preference for some essences over others, but rather complete *indifference* with respect to his options.

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so.¹⁹

If God is genuinely free with respect to what He creates, then He must be completely indifferent with respect to His choices. God's freedom thus entails that there can be nothing in the essences themselves that makes some preferable to others.

Finally, because Descartes maintains that God's creative action cannot be necessitated, he rejects the Suarezian view that the essences flow from the divine essence. God's essence is necessary; hence, if possible essences flow from the divine essence, they must do so necessarily, in which case God would have no choice with respect to their nature or goodness. Furthermore, if the essences express the divine essence, their nature and goodness would

17. CSM II, 293; AT 435; Sixth Set of Replies.

18. CSM II, 291; AT 432; Sixth Set of Replies.

19. CSM II, 291; AT 431–32; Sixth Set of Replies.

be prior to the divine will, and consequently God's choice from among the essences would be limited, determined, and non-indifferent. Therefore, Descartes argues, essences do not *emanate* from God as rays from the sun, nor are essences in any way necessarily *attached* to the divine essence.²⁰

As we have seen, Descartes's primary objection to divine realism points to its inability to allow for genuine divine freedom. According to Descartes, if God is genuinely free with respect to what he creates, then he must be indifferent with respect to what he creates. Consequently, there can be nothing in the essences themselves that would determine his choice. In addition, if God is free, then his role in determining the nature of the essences must be active, rather than passive. Thus the essences cannot flow from the divine essence; they must be actively created by the divine being. Descartes thus asserts, against Suárez, that God is the efficient cause of essences. Since this part of the debate has been widely misinterpreted, I will examine it in detail in the next section.

2.2 The Efficient Causality of Essences

In a letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes:

As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. So we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed.²¹

Most commentators agree with Cronin's finding that Descartes's attack in this letter is aimed at Suárez.²² Furthermore, most commentators follow Cronin's interpretation of the content of the Suárez-Descartes debate. According to that interpretation, the dispute concerns whether there could be eternal truths if there were no God. Pointing to the last line of the above passage, Cronin concludes that Descartes objects to Suárez's view that eternal truths would be true "even if God were not [existent]."²³

20. CSM III, 25; AT 152; To Mersenne, 27 May 1630. The passage is quoted in the text below.

21. CSM, 24; AT 149–50; To Mersenne, 6 May 1630.

22. T. J. Cronin, "Eternal Truths in the Thought of Descartes and His Adversary," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21 (1960): 553–59.

23. Cronin, "Eternal Truths," p. 559.

Although Suárez *is* Descartes's adversary in this letter, the generally accepted interpretation of the letter's content is mistaken. Descartes and Suárez do *not* disagree about whether eternal truths would remain true in the absence of the divine being. Both Descartes and Suárez obviously hold that the existence of God is necessary, and his nonexistence an absolute impossibility. Thus there can be no consideration of what would be the case if God did not exist. Furthermore, as explained above, Suárez could not possibly suggest that eternal truths could be true without the divine being. For, on his view, the eternal truths are grounded in the essences that flow from the divine essence; no God, no essences, no eternal truths. The disagreement between Suárez and Descartes is not, then, about whether essential propositions could be true if there were no God. The issue of contention is about the relation between the eternal truths and God *qua* efficient cause, not about the relation between eternal truths and the existence of God *per se*.

Recall that Suárez holds that neither essences, nor the eternal truth of essential propositions based upon them, requires an efficient cause. Unactualized essences are absolutely nothing; therefore, they cannot be the product of some efficient cause. In addition, essential propositions remain true even if the essences remain unactualized, and hence their truth does not require an efficient cause.

As we saw above, Descartes insists that God's role with respect to the creation of essences must be active, rather than passive. Thus against Suárez, Descartes argues that if the essences were not causally dependent upon God's will, then the nature and goodness of the essences would be prior to God's choice. If the nature or goodness of an essence were given prior to divine creation, then God could not be completely indifferent. Thus, if God were not the efficient cause of essences, then his creative action would not be genuinely free.

Therefore, Descartes claims that essences, and thus eternal truths, are dependent upon God as an efficient and total cause.²⁴ God brings every thing into existence and recreates it at every moment. Such dependence "applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being true or good."²⁵ In a conversation with Burman, Descartes claims that even God's ideas of possible things cannot be prior to his will and are causally dependent upon him. He maintains that God's ideas of possible things,

too depend on God, like everything else. His will is the cause not only of what is actual and to come, but also of what is possible and of the simple natures. There is nothing that we can think of or ought to think of that should not be said to depend on God.²⁶

24. CSM III, 25; AT 151–52; To Mersenne, 27 May 1630. Quoted in full below.

25. CSM II, 293; AT 435; Sixth Set of Replies.

26. CSM III, 343; AT 160; Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648.

And earlier in the letter to Mersenne, Descartes explains that God is related to essences and eternal truths by

the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author.²⁷

Descartes goes on to argue that if essences lack the efficient cause of God, then essential propositions would be true prior to God's knowledge of them, which is just plain "blasphemous." For if essences are not causally dependent upon God, then they would be true independently of him. Because everything is dependent upon the divine being, the truth of essential propositions is dependent upon the divine will; that is, a proposition is true because God causes it to be as such. And since in God, willing and understanding are the same, a proposition is true because God knows it to be as such. Therefore, Descartes concludes, it is mistaken to suggest that essential propositions would be true if God did not exist. That is, it is mistaken to suggest that essential propositions would be true *without the efficient causality of God*.

The disputed issue between Suárez and Descartes, then, is whether or not God is related to the essences as efficient cause. Thus, in the often misinterpreted letter to Mersenne, Descartes argues against Suárez that if the eternal truths are not created by God, then they would be independent of the divine being. And as Descartes maintains that divine creation, will, and intellect are the same, if the truths are prior to divine creation, then they would be prior to the divine will and intellect, as well. Consequently, God's creative action would not be indifferent. If God is genuinely free with respect to what He creates, then *everything* must be dependent upon God—causally dependent. So, "we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true," for the truth of essential propositions requires the efficient causality of God.

As we have seen, for Descartes, divine freedom cannot be a choice from among given possible essences. On his view, to say that God's creative action is free entails that he is indifferent with respect to what he creates. Therefore, prior to his choice, an essence cannot have any inherent nature, goodness or possibility. All such features must depend upon God and must be determined by him, with no prior restrictions or limitations.

Descartes thus rejects divine realism primarily because the divine realist is committed to the claim that God's creative actions would be in some sense

27. CSM III, 25; AT 151–52; To Mersenne, 27 May 1630.

determined and limited; determined and limited by the fixed natures of the essences. For Descartes, Suarezian essences may be absolutely nothing, but they are still good or bad, possible or impossible, and as such they influence God's decision. The divine realist represents God "as if He were Jupiter or Saturn," and as if He were subject "to the Styx and the Fates."²⁸ Because God is free, argues Descartes, He must determine the natures of the essences and lay down the laws of nature, "just as a king lays down the laws in his kingdom."

2.3 Descartes's Theory

I do not intend to suggest that Descartes's creation theory of eternal truths is a good theory—it is not. I merely want to try to provide a better understanding of it. So, now that I have explained Descartes's reasons for rejecting Suárez's divine realism and Descartes's motivation for adopting voluntarism, I will examine how Descartes's creation theory is supposed to work.

Descartes's creation story might go something like this: In the beginning, God and nothing else exists. Unactualized essences are nothing, and since nothing has no properties, unactualized essences are neither possible, good, nor in any way determined. Consequently, there are no truths about these essences prior to God's creative act. God then creates essences, and, in so doing, determines their goodness, possibility, and nature. God renders the nature of a possible essence necessary, and thus essential propositions based upon them are rendered necessarily true. Since God's act is from all eternity, the corresponding truths are eternal. And since in God, willing, understanding, and creating are all the same, the eternal truths are true only because God wills them, knows them, and creates them as such.²⁹ Thus God's decision to create this universe with all of its essences, truths, and creatures is not a choice from many different possible universes, but a choice from nothing. In this way, His choice is indifferent and undetermined. His act of creation is, therefore, truly free.

This picture of Descartes' creation theory is quite different from recent interpretations, most of which suggest that Descartes offers a conceptualist solution to the problem of eternal truths. Such commentators maintain

28. CSM III, 23; AT 145; To Mersenne, 15 April 1630.

29. From what has been explained thus far, it should be evident that although Descartes does offer his creation theory, in part, by focusing on divine omnipotence, it is mistaken to suggest that such consideration is the driving factor. As we have seen, much of Descartes's concern surrounds the preservation of divine freedom and the fact that nothing can be independent of God. Furthermore, because Descartes identifies divine power with divine will and understanding, it seems somewhat arbitrary (or just plain contradictory) to maintain that one of these faculties is in any way prior to the others.

that, according to Descartes, eternal truths are grounded in the human intellect; that “modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking;”³⁰ that the “necessities human reason discovers by analysis and demonstration are just necessities of its own contingent nature;”³¹ and that, “Descartes [regards] the ‘necessity’ we perceive in mathematical propositions as in some sense and degree a function of the constitution of our minds—themselves finite ‘creatures’.”³² Elsewhere, I offer a detailed analysis of this conceptualist interpretation of Descartes’s eternal truths, showing that it has no textual support and that it contradicts some of Descartes’s basic beliefs.³³ In this article, I do not want to delve into the problems with the conceptualist interpretation. For now, it is enough to see that if my interpretation is correct, then Descartes cannot be a conceptualist. For, on my interpretation, the nature of essences and the corresponding truth of essential propositions are prior to human intellects.³⁴

Even though this interpretation of Descartes’s creation theory might differ from recent interpretations, the main problems that arise are still the same. In particular, however read, Descartes’s voluntarism will be subject to the following objection: If the essences are created by God, then it seems that they could have been other than what they are.

PART III: ASSESSMENT OF DESCARTES’S VOLUNTARISM

The primary objection raised against Descartes’s voluntarism concerns the question whether God could have made an essence other than what it actually is. Ultimately the problem involves how it is that God can possibly act, if there are no modalities prior to His action. Descartes offers a

30. Jonathan Bennett, “Descartes’s Theory of Modality,” *The Philosophical Review* 103 (1994): 647.

31. Frankfurt, “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths,” p. 45. Frankfurt goes on to write that, in coming to know necessities, human reason, “does not discover the nature of the world as it is in itself, or as it appears to God.” He later concludes that, according to Descartes, “Reality may not be rational” (p. 54). But surely a rationalist like Descartes would not want to accept such a claim. His metaphysical system rests upon the assumption that reality is purely rational.

32. Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 125.

33. In particular, I show that Jonathan Bennett’s conceptualist interpretation of Descartes is mistaken: “Descartes is not a Conceptualist,” *Arété* 24 (2002):2.

34. If, however, one takes the *single act response* seriously (see below) then one might maintain that the essential propositions are not prior to human intellects, but simultaneous with them. Even if this is the case, it is clear that the contents of human intellects cannot ground the truth of essential propositions since what grounds such propositions must be prior to, not simultaneous with, the propositions themselves.

solution to such an objection. He explains that God's actions occur as a result of a single act of God's will. As I will show below, however, this response is inadequate.

3.1 The Main Objection to Descartes's Voluntarism

Most of Descartes's contemporaries and commentators believe that Descartes is wrong to maintain that God determines the truth of essential propositions. Most philosophers agree with Caterus, who argues against Descartes, that essences do not require a cause for they cannot be anything other than what they are—a boat is a boat and nothing else; Davus is Davus and not Oedipus.³⁵ Likewise, some commentators wonder whether Descartes's God could have made it false that a triangle has three sides. And recent commentators struggle with related questions about Descartes's modal theory: Does Descartes mean to suggest that nothing is absolutely necessary or impossible? At the root of all of these objections is the point that if God determines the nature of essences, then it seems that He could have created essences to be different from what they are. But, Descartes's objectors argue, this consequence is absurd; an essence of a thing cannot be anything other than what it is. The essence of a triangle, for example, cannot be that of a figure with anything other than three sides, otherwise it is not the essence of a triangle. And thus most philosophers assert that the nature of essences, and thus essential propositions, cannot be the end products of God's efficient causality.

There are several places where Descartes attempts to reply to such objections. In some places, he explains that whether or not God could create an essence differently than what he did is beyond the scope of the human intellect, and thus we ought to suspend judgment with respect to it. So, in a letter to Arnauld, Descartes explains that the inability of the human intellect to comprehend that God could make a proposition like, "A triangle has three sides," false entails that we ought not to judge whether it is in God's power to do so.³⁶

I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive

35. CSM II, 67; AT 93; First Set of Objections.

36. In a conversation with Burman, Descartes claims that God is the cause not only of what is actual, but of what is possible. Burman asks whether it follows from this "that God could have commanded a creature to hate him, and thereby made this a good thing to do?" Descartes replies, "God could not now do this; but we simply do not know what he could have done. In any case, why should he not have been able to

a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception.³⁷

Commentators who read Descartes as a conceptualist point to this passage as support for their interpretation. However, there seems to be nothing in this passage that suggests that the truth of essential propositions is grounded in the human intellect. Descartes does not say that “ $1 + 2 = 3$ ” is necessarily true because he cannot conceive of its denial.³⁸ He merely maintains that he cannot conceive of a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3.

Rather than asserting the conceptualist claim that what is inconceivable is impossible, in this letter Descartes is abiding by his method: Make judgments only about those propositions that are known clearly and distinctly. If something is not fully understood, then withhold judgment. In this case, he claims that because he cannot conceive of a sum of 1 and 2 that is not equal to 3, he cannot deny that God could make such a proposition true, though he cannot affirm it either.

Whereas in the letter to Arnauld, Descartes asserts the weaker claim that he cannot judge whether God can do something which he cannot conceive, in a letter to Mesland he makes the stronger claim that because God's power is infinite, His actions are not determined, and thus God *can* make true what is inconceivable to us.

give this command to one of his creatures?” (CSM III, 343; AT 159–60; Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648).

Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice 4 makes 8, and so on, for I admit that this is unintelligible to us. . . . I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. (CSM II, 294; AT 436; Sixth Set of Replies)

Note that Descartes goes on to claim: “Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths ‘depend on the human intellect or other existing things’; they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity” (emphasis added). Here is one place where Descartes clearly rejects the conceptualist position that Bennett attributes to him.

37. CSM III, 358–59; AT 224; To Arnauld, 29 July 1648.

38. Notice that Descartes is *not* saying that *because* I cannot conceive the denial of “ $1 + 2 = 3$,” the proposition is necessary. Thus, Bennett is wrong to suggest that this passage supports a conceptualist reading. Had Descartes intended to put forward a conceptualist position, he would have made a point like the following: *because* I cannot conceive of the sum of 1 and 2 as being anything other than 3, it is necessary; had God created my mind differently, and had I been able to conceive the denial of “ $1 + 2 = 3$,” this proposition would not then be necessarily true.

I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite.³⁹

In Arnauld's letter, Descartes addresses the difficulty that one might have in comprehending how God could do something which is inconceivable to us. In Mesland's letter, Descartes addresses a different problem: The difficulty of comprehending how God would be acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles. We are again reminded that (1) God's power is infinite; and (2) our intellect is finite. In the letter to Arnauld, Descartes argues that it follows from (2) that we cannot judge whether God can do something or not. In the letter to Mesland, he asserts that the stronger claim follows from (1): That God can do things that are inconceivable to us.

It is important to see that neither the response in the letter to Arnauld, nor the response in the letter to Mesland is adequate, for neither response addresses the root of the problem. The question about whether God could have made it false that " $1 + 2 = 3$ " is neither merely a question about God's omnipotence nor one's ability to conceive the denial of the proposition. The problem involves an understanding of how a voluntarist can possibly explain the actual creation of essences and their essential propositions. Consider what is being asked when an objector wonders whether God could have made it false that " $1 + 2 = 3$ ": The objector wants to know whether God could have made the essence of 3 other than what it is. Could God have *possibly* created the essence of 3 in such a way that it does not include the property, 'being the sum of 1 and 2'?⁴⁰

39. CSM III, 235; AT 118–19; To Mesland, 2 May 1644.

40. Bennett claims that, because the voluntarist interpretation of the sort that I am offering falls into this problem, it cannot be the correct interpretation of Descartes's theory of eternal truths. Bennett fails to realize, however, that the conceptualist interpretation is faced with the same, or at least a similar but equally difficult, problem: On the conceptualist interpretation, for God to make it false that twice four equals eight, he would have had to create the human intellect in such a way that I could conceive that two times four does not equal eight. So I would then have to have a different understanding of two, four, and eight. And, on the conceptualist position, that different understanding would then result in different essences, concepts, or natures of two, four, and eight.

Or consider the interlocutor who wonders whether God could have made the law of noncontradiction false: The objector in this case wants to know whether God could have created an essential nature in such a way that it included a property and its opposite. Could God have *possibly* created the essence of man to both include and exclude the property, 'being an animal'?

Such questions involve the very first moment, when God chooses to create a set of essences; that moment when God gives an essence its nature, goodness, and possibility. At that moment, there is nothing, and nothing is possible (for prior to God's decision, nothing is possible, impossible, good, or bad). Clearly, this does not entail that everything is impossible. Because God makes some essences possible, they cannot be impossible prior to that determination. The ultimate question, then, is: What is the modal status of essences prior to God's creative force?

This, Descartes would maintain, is a misleading question; it presupposes that there are essences and that they have some modal status prior to God's creative force. But, Descartes would argue, this misses the point, for there are no essences prior to God's creation. Before God chooses to create, there is nothing. Nothing has no properties, thus nothing has no modal status. Therefore, it makes no sense to inquire into the modal status of essences prior to creation.

And so, on Descartes's account, there is no sense in asking about what God could have done at this first moment—for there are no possibilities, impossibilities, or necessities at this first moment. There is only God and nothing else. Presumably there are truths concerning God's essence.⁴¹ However, as explained above, possible essences do not flow from God, otherwise He would have no role in their determination.⁴² Nor does God choose from

Bennett's mistake is twofold: First, he mistakenly concludes that conceptualism will not require any discussion about essences. Second, he mistakenly assumes that it is somehow easier to comprehend what it would mean to have a differently structured intellect than it is to comprehend what it would mean to have differently structured essences. (Or, rather, because conceptualism involves what the intellect comprehends, conceptualism has an easy out: Different truths require differently structured intellects—so the conceptualist can maintain that there could be different truths, even if *we* cannot comprehend them.) It is important to see, however, that conceptualism does involve essences—it is merely a matter of priority—which is primary, the intellect, or the essence. Consequently, the conceptualist interpretation is in neither a better, nor worse, position with regard to the talk of differently determined essences.

41. There are many questions concerning God's nature and His determination of modalities. For example, does God determine that He is a necessary being? Could He have made Himself a contingent being? Although I do not treat them here, these questions are quite significant and pose serious problems for Descartes' creation theory. Gueroult provides a good discussion of them in *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons* II, as does Frankfurt in "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths."

42. Although in some places Descartes claims that the existence of God is an eternal truth from which all other eternal truths follow. See below.

given sets of possible essences. At that first moment, He creates. He creates the essences, determines their nature and their goodness, and thereby determines the truth of essential propositions.

And now we have arrived at the major problem with Descartes's voluntarism: To suggest that nothing is possible prior to God's determination is absurd. Such a proposal would entail that, at the first moment, it is not possible that God create the essence of 3 such that it is the sum of 1 and 2 (of course, it is neither impossible nor necessary, either). And, on this reading, it is not impossible for God to create a man who is both an animal and a non-animal (though it is neither possible nor necessary, either).

3.2 Descartes's Solution: The Single Act of God

Drawing from some of his predecessors, Descartes has a response to this sort of criticism. Other medieval philosophers, faced with similar objections, assert the atemporality of God. Augustine, for example, considers a theological problem similar to the one considered above. Rather than considering what was possible prior to God's choice, Augustine wonders what God was doing before he created the world. He explains that this question incorrectly presupposes that God is a temporal being. According to Augustine, there is no past, present, or future for God; God "surpasses all times" in the "sublimity of an ever present eternity":

Your years are one day, and your day is not each day, but today, because with you today does not give way to tomorrow, nor does it succeed yesterday. With you, today is eternity. Therefore you begot the coeternal, to whom you said, "This day have I begotten you." You have made all times, and you are before all times, and not at any time was there no time.⁴³

God's intellect and will are unchanging; thus, in the beginning, God knows heaven and earth without any change in His knowledge, and makes heaven and earth without any difference in His activity.⁴⁴ Likewise, Boethius explains that God's knowledge is not temporal, the divine being "sees at once, in a single glance, all things that are, or were, or are to come."⁴⁵ Aquinas, too, asserts that God's being knows neither past nor future.⁴⁶

If God's being is atemporal, then He sees and wills things simultaneously and all at once. Descartes can respond to the questions above by maintaining that the creation of the essences and eternal truths takes place by means of a *single act* of God's will, intellect, and power.

43. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 11, chap. 13.

44. Augustine, *Confessions*, chap. 31.

45. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 5, Poem 2.

46. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, 13, 11.

I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the ones which you suggest: “that God might have brought it about that His creatures were independent of him.” But if we would know the immensity of His power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between His intellect and His will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in Him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St. Augustine: “They are so because thou see’st them to be so,” because in God *seeing* and *willing* are one and the same thing.⁴⁷

And even His understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by means of operations that are in a certain sense distinct from another; we must rather suppose that there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything.⁴⁸

You ask what God did in order to produce [eternal truths]. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. . . . In God willing, understanding, and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.⁴⁹

And so, following Augustine, Descartes would explain that we should ask neither about the “first moment,” nor about the “second moment,” nor should we ask about the modal status of essences prior to the first moment. There is nothing before the first moment, for there are no moments. There is only one single act from all eternity. It makes no sense to inquire about the moment prior to this act—for there is no moment prior to the act, there is just the act—nothing before, nothing after. The divine will, intellect, and power are one and the same; thus, in one single act, God wills, understands, and creates the essences, their natures, goodness, and possibility. He thereby creates the eternal truths based upon them, and He creates the world according to such essences and eternal truths.

At first glance, this appears to be a satisfactory answer. Once again, we can see Descartes adopting Suárez’s primary claim that unactualized essences are absolutely nothing—but nothing is just what it is—nothing. There is nothing prior to God’s choice to create; there is nothing prior to God’s understanding and power; there is nothing prior to God’s creative act. And thus there is just the single act of God, nothing else. In this way, Descartes can avoid the major objection raised above. It no longer makes sense to ask him about the modal status of essences prior to creation. There

47. CSM III, 235; AT 119; To Mesland, 2 May 1644.

48. CSM I, 201; AT 14; *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.23.

49. CSM III, 25; AT 152; To Mersenne, 27 May 1630.

is nothing prior to creation, and nothing has no properties, no modal status, and no ontological status, either.

However, the *single act response* seems to leave no room for divine freedom. Consider the following passage:

From the metaphysical point of view, however, it is quite unintelligible that God should be anything but completely unalterable. It is irrelevant that the decrees could have been separated from God; indeed, this should not really be asserted. For although God is completely indifferent with respect to all things, He necessarily made the decrees He did, since He necessarily willed what was best, even though it was of His own will that He did what was best. We should not make a separation here between the necessity and the indifference that apply to God's decrees; although His actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary. Then again, although we may conceive that the decrees could have been separated from God, this is merely a token procedure of our own reasoning: the distinction thus introduced between God Himself and his decrees is a mental, not a real one. In reality the decrees could not have been separated from God: He is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could He have existed without them. So it is clear enough how God accomplishes all things in a single act.⁵⁰

In addition, following the philosophers before him, Descartes writes in several places that God's nature is *immutable*.⁵¹ As immutable, God always acts in the same way. Thus "it is clear that God is unalterable with regard to [the decrees that have already been enacted by Him], and, from the metaphysical point of view, it is impossible to conceive of the matter otherwise."⁵²

However, it seems that if God is immutable and unalterable, then He cannot be genuinely free with respect to His actions and thus with respect to what He creates. If He always acts in the same way, it would appear that He cannot genuinely choose the nature, goodness, and possibility of essences. Thus one significant problem with Descartes's theory of eternal truths is the apparent incompatibility between the claim that God determines the nature, goodness, and modal status of essences and the claim that God's creative action is a single, immutable act from all eternity.⁵³

50. CSM III, 348; AT 166–67; Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648.

51. CSM I, 93; AT 38; *The World*, chap. 7. Also:

For what more firm and solid foundation could one find for establishing a truth, even if one wished to choose it at will, than the very firmness and immutability which is in God?

So it is that these two rules follow manifestly from the mere fact that God is immutable and that, acting always in the same way, he always produces the same effect. (CSM I, 96; AT 43; *ibid.*)

52. CSM III, 348; AT 166; Conversation with Burman, 16 Apr. 1648.

53. Aquinas is subject to a similar problem. His theory seems to entail the following incompatible claims: (a) God's creative act is identical with the necessary

Another way to understand the problem is to see that Descartes's theory arrives at the same sort of paradox that Augustine was concerned about: Either there is a first moment, or there is no first moment. If there is a first moment and God determines modalities, then prior to that choice, nothing is possible or necessary. Hence, God makes what is not possible possible, and what is not necessary necessary, and this seems absurd. Furthermore, 'not possible' and 'not necessary' are themselves modalities, and they are such prior to God's determination. Consequently, there are some modalities that God does not freely create. If, on the other hand, there is no first moment, then God's act is not a genuine choice since He could not have done otherwise. Either way, God is not genuinely free with respect to what He creates. And if one tries to maintain, as Descartes does, that there is no moment prior to God's choice, then God's act is not free. It is but one single act, from all eternity, determined and necessary.

Descartes is aware of the above problem. It is interesting to note that in some passages, in response to the problem, he espouses a divine realist view that, ultimately, God's essence is the foundation for the truth of essential propositions: "Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God Himself; rather it is identical with God Himself."⁵⁴ "For what more firm and solid foundation could one find for establishing a truth . . . than the very firmness and immutability which is in God?"⁵⁵ And at the end of the letter to Mersenne, where Descartes attacks Suárez's solution to the problem of eternal truths, he seems to assert the divine realist conclusion: "the existence of God is the first and the most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others proceed."⁵⁶ Thus, at the beginning of the day, Descartes attacks Suárez's divine realism on the grounds that it threatens divine freedom. In its place, Descartes puts forth a voluntarist solution to the problem of eternal truths. However, at the end of the day, when voluntarism collapses into necessitarianism, Descartes falls back on divine realism to account for the eternal and necessary truth of essential propositions.

CONCLUSION

The problem of eternal truths involves two claims that appear to be inconsistent: (1) There are necessary and eternal truths; and (2) God is free with respect to what He creates. Both Suárez and Descartes offer compatibilist solutions to the problem. That is, both attempt to show that the two claims are not inconsistent. However, while Suárez begins from the truth of (1) and

and immutable divine nature, and (b) the world, as an effect of God's creative act, is not necessary.

54. CSM III, 348; AT 166; Conversation with Burman, 16 April 1648.

55. CSM I, 96; AT 43; *The World*, chap. 7.

56. CSM III, 24; AT 150; To Mersenne, 6 May 1630.

tries to reconcile it with (2), Descartes begins from (2) and attempts to show that it is compatible with (1). Unfortunately, like most compatibilist solutions, both Suárez's divine realism and Descartes's voluntarism fail. Descartes is right to see that divine realism cannot allow for divine freedom; Suárez correctly recognizes that voluntarism cannot account for necessity.

How is the theist to solve this problem? It seems that he must sacrifice either (1) or (2). It is interesting to note, however, that if (1) is false, then the truth of (2) cannot be necessary; if there are no necessary truths, then the claim that God is free can not be necessarily true. Perhaps the best solution is to follow the Spinozistic theory that (1) is true and (2) is false. And thus it is not so surprising that both Suárez's and Descartes's theories of eternal truth tend to collapse into necessitarianism.